

Planning Nursery and Foundation Gardens

There is a trend towards encouraging children under six to spend as much time as possible outside, and for there to be a seamless change from the classroom to the garden with learning through play happening both inside and outside.

The Early Learning Goals are typically achieved by having a variety of activities available to the children at one time. Zoning the garden with activities that either are set up or easy to set up, with local storage and outside shelter, makes it easier for the teachers to set up “learning in the garden” and extends the time this can happen effectively.

Gardens will normally work better if the layouts are activity led rather than “toy led”. This is a subtle but significant difference. It can be quite tempting to choose a “toy” from a catalogue that matches funding and to postpone the overall plan until further funding is available. We suggest making an overall plan even if the available funds are modest. Then choose the highest priority to spend the limited budget on. This may save money and time later if equipment does not have to be moved to accommodate phase two. It also helps with inspections if there is a plan in place even if there is no money available to implement it.

Principles that are likely to be relevant to the planning process:

Surfacing changes are expensive and so it is normally worthwhile to keep these to a minimum. If the area is small grass may not survive unless access to it is restricted. The problem of grass going to mud is usually more of a problem if there is a mound involved.

Solid surfaces (tarmac or paving) are necessary for wheeled toys although they can be used on rubber even if it makes them more difficult to peddle. A variety of surfaces can have benefits. Bark is the softest of the safer surfacing options as well as being economical, wooden decking can be used to give a surface warm enough to sit on for most of the year. Some nurseries, particularly where the area is small, have covered the whole outdoor area with a rubber surface. This is a costly option and can have the unforeseen side effect of increasing accidents on tarmac when the children graduate to the main school. The benefit of a complete rubber surface is that it will allow flexible use of a smaller space, with bikes one day and climbing blocks the next.

Sand and water play are obvious candidates for outside play. We favour an above ground sandpit with solid sliding lids. This is the easiest layout to manage and has the further benefits of being easier for the adult staff to join in with the play and providing a play surface when shut. Some teachers like a large sandpit to create a “beach effect”, the most common problems with these are: the cost of sand top ups and covering arrangements. Simple water play systems with fresh water every day are normally the easiest way to manage water quality issues (e.g. legionella).

There is a curriculum requirement for Foundation age children to be able to build up arm strength by having somewhere to pull themselves up; this helps with fine motor development. This need is not met by low-level equipment that is good for improving balance and encouraging role-play. One of the problems of meeting this need is to design equipment that will enable able children to be stretched without causing a supervision burden when smaller children have access to the garden.

Some of our designs have been developed with experienced nursery teachers as solutions to these problems. Where space and/or budgets are tight we do concentrate on curriculum essentials, as well as developing more ambitious plans when they are not.

Role-play is an important part of the active play for younger children and therefore good agility play layouts incorporate role-play opportunities. The most obvious piece of quieter role-play equipment is the playhouse. Adaptable equipment is useful in smaller nurseries (e.g. where the playhouse can easily also be a shop, office or builders shed). Play panels can also be formed into role-play areas in either a permanent or semi permanent style. Dedicated themed areas are the chosen design for many larger nurseries. There are less obvious simple structures that can increase the frequency and variety of role-play (e.g. petrol pumps in the bike area, simple frames that can be quickly made into tents).

Outdoor games and blackboards can be incorporated into fences, table tops and play surfaces as well as being attached to storage sheds, walls and buildings. Using designs without removable pieces or local storage can make their use less work for the staff. Games can be used to expand the variety of use of role-play areas and simple structures like wind chime frames are useful in both contexts.

Quiet seating would normally be incorporated into other aspects such as: within an area to gather the whole class, amongst the planters or the role-play areas.

Small areas of grass, and sometimes the edges of large areas, need protecting from use in wet weather. We often use “seat fences” as a simple way of achieving this as an alternative to permanent or semi-permanent fencing.

Big gardening (growing) projects are cheapest carried out at ground level, but planters are suitable for smaller projects and may help with other things like zoning the play area or making quiet seating corners. How to combine gardening with learning goals is a large topic in itself, we are developing further ideas at www.dig2discover.co.uk.

Pond and other wildlife observations are often restricted to the school pond area. While it is possible for any of the above activities to be met by visiting other areas of the school, the more that can be included in the nursery garden the more popular it seems to be with the “inspectors”. Small ponds within the garden with safety grids can achieve this. Using either raised ponds or having adjoining decks so that the children can lie down, increases the amount of time they will choose to spend observing.

Some of the gardening activities can encourage wildlife and it can be quite easy to improve the opportunities for wildlife within a teaching garden.

Site considerations and teacher preferences will have a big influence on the overall plan. Although we do offer specific suggestions if asked, we certainly never regard them as the only satisfactory solutions.

Summary of FWRP Design Criteria for Foundation Stage Outdoor Activities

Aim	Reason
Design should be “activity led” rather than “structure led”	There are too many alternative choices of equipment. “Activity led” design will narrow down the options in a constructive way
A whole area plan should be drawn up regardless of the immediate budget available	To avoid the cost of moving activities in the future as more funds become available. If moving things in the future seems inevitable ensure that the choice of equipment reflects this. Some items can be moved easily and others can be costly or impractical to move. To establish immediate priorities and longer term objectives
Minimize surface changes	This requirement is driven by a desire to minimize cost, as surface changes tend to be expensive items within an overall plan. This needs to be considered early in the process because it will have a big impact on the overall layout
Consider how the children will move between the activities	To ensure variety of play Easy supervision Absence of conflict opportunities between children (some types of popular individual play equipment e.g. swings, spring rockers are particularly bad in this respect)
Separation of activities that need a higher level of supervision to one area	To make the supervision easier To allow children more independence in areas where close supervision is not needed
Designs that are inherently safe and easy to supervise	This gives the staff time to direct and expand play rather than just manage safety
Designs that are durable and attractive	Good value for money Stimulating original play

Foundation Stage Outdoor Activity Options (in no particular order):

Primary Activity	Variations	Linking to Other Activities
Water Play	Taps, hoses, buckets Flow between water trays at different levels	Petrol pumps Slopes and other materials and objects
Ball Play	Football, netball Tennis ball on a string to hit with bat Throwing and catching	Co-operative or team play Counting Colour recognition
Role Play	Part of climbing equipment Permanent role play structures (play house, play panel corners) Frames and structures that can be “dressed” for different activities	Can be linked to most activities where two or more children are involved
Musical Instruments	Making sounds from different materials and different shapes and sizes of the same materials	Performance stage or less formal seating
Sand play	Large and small scale Dry sand for flowing properties Damp sand for sand castles	Building
Building	Construction with blocks and pre-formed panels	Rubber surfacing to make it safer for the children to climb on what they have built (children can be taught simple risk assessment with this activity)
Agility and Climbing	Improving balance and co-ordination Building upper body strength Learning to assess and develop their skills	Big opportunity for co-operation and role play
Gardening	There are a wide range of linked topics for gardening from basic digging and planting to quite detailed experiments	Co-operating and team building
Wildlife discovery and observations	As with gardening there are a huge range of possibilities from basic discovery to detailed recognition and appreciation of seasonal variations and basic life cycles	Discovery, co-operating and can be quite adventurous if the wild area available is big or “really wild”
Ground games on grass, rubber surfacing or decking	Traditional party games, rhymes and story time “Parachute” games	Particularly with a rubber surface variations including number, shape and colour recognition can be built in by adding graphics to the surface
Wheeled Toys	Long routes increase the variety of play Can incorporate dedicated role play (petrol pumps and drive thru shops)	Can be used for “haulage” of other items Possible link with petrol pumps and water play (coloured water)

Why do some layouts work better than others?

Zoning and the interaction between activities seem to be the key difference between gardens that achieve a good variety of play and those less successful. Organisation can also have a noticeable effect. When the use of the outside space is timetabled the children (and staff) tend to treat it more as “playtime” and a limited number of high-energy activities predominate. When children are allowed to “free-flow” between inside and outside the children are much more chilled out and liable to creative play.

There are one or two design features that are almost the opposite of zoning. Bike tracks and “sensory paths” are probably the most common. Bike tracks distribute high energy around the garden, which can disrupt quieter options, and sensory paths produce more of a trip hazard than similar materials allocated to small areas (probably around an activity). Spreading individual items of low level play equipment around a garden can cause similar issues.

Good layouts allow teachers to spend more time working creatively with the children and less managing safety, setting up and tidying away. Small storage facilities close to the point of use, and where possible self-service, can massively reduce set up time. Having six semi permanent activities can make it practical to provide a good choice (say eight in total) even in marginal weather.

Two contrasting plans are shown:

The “Park Lane Area” is too small to allow the full range of activities and is focused on the quieter activities that extend the classroom outside. Small amounts of gardening are included but the majority of wildlife observation and high-energy activities will need to take place elsewhere in the school grounds.

The “Emmer Green Area” has enough space for three classes and a full range of activities and is an example of how “zoning” can work.

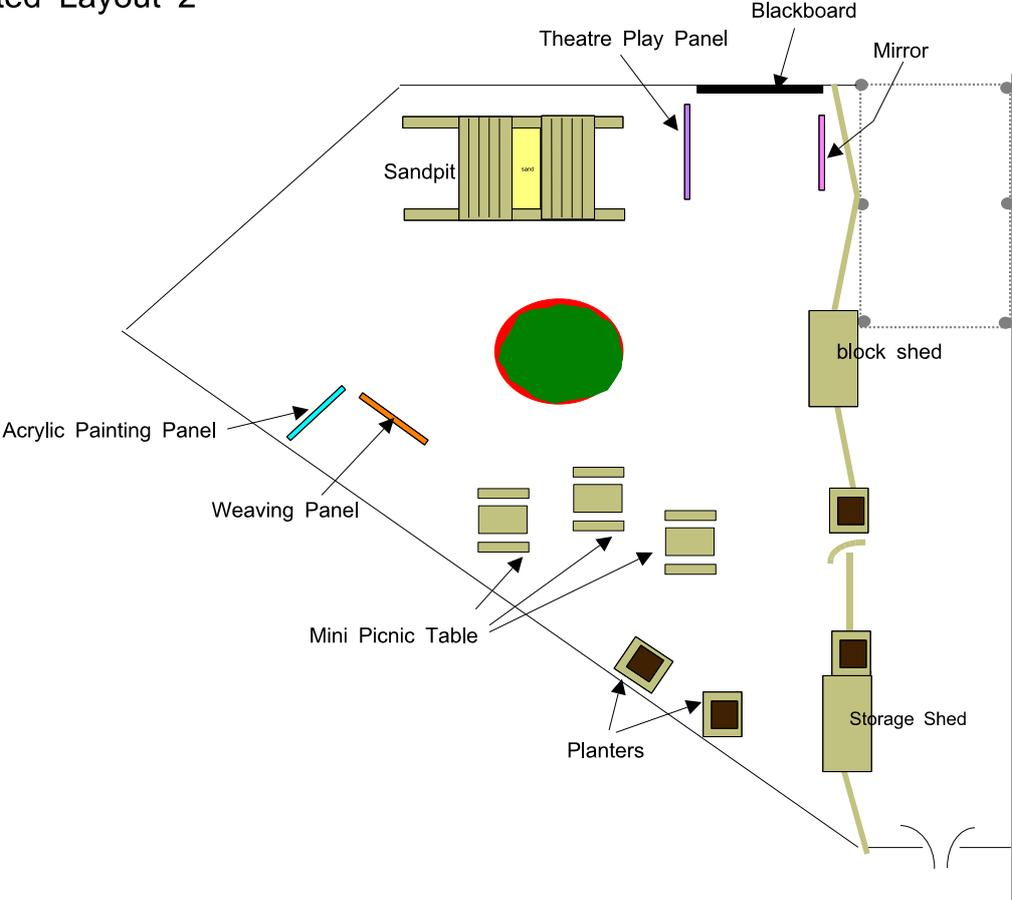
With so many variables it is highly unlikely that any two overall plans are going to be the same even when some of the features are duplicated. The overall grand plan including activity zones should be the first phase of any major changes to the teaching garden area but it can be quite helpful to let some of the details evolve over time. Some flexibility can be designed into the plans and this will enable individual teachers to put their ideas into practice.

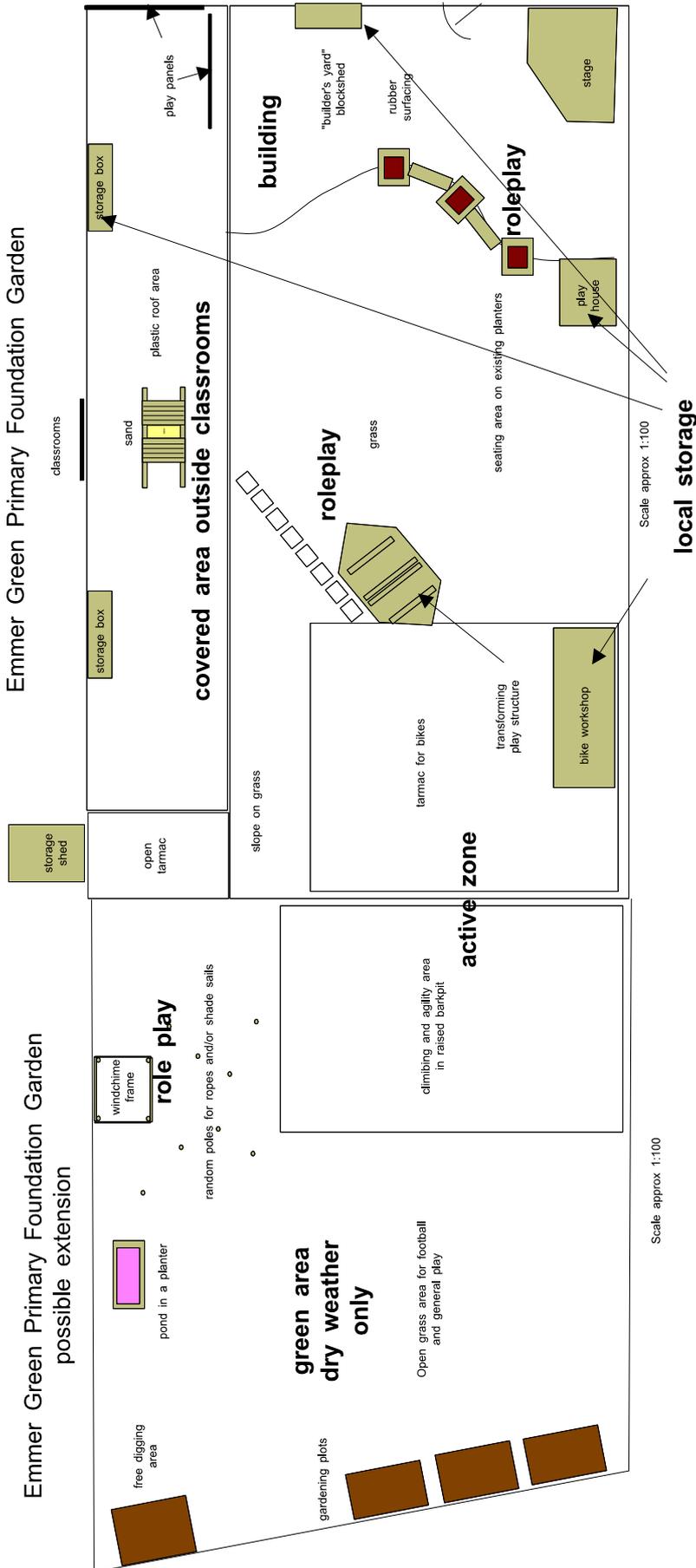
With so many “correct” alternative layouts how can you tell if one is working?

Children are spread out over the garden area in groups quietly moving between a number of activities. If the children are rushing about indulging in a minimum number of high-energy activities (“Playtime Syndrome”) it is a sign that access to the garden is limited. Even when role-play and other quieter activities are on offer they tend only to predominate, as choices, when children have continuous access to the garden. Where there is not enough space for high-energy activities inside the garden short “playtime” sessions elsewhere in the school grounds may be needed.

Park Lane Primary School
Nursery Outdoor Teaching Area

Suggested Layout 2





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